

May 18, 2006

NEW STORE

Rolling Hills steps up once again to aid economic development in Ellsworth County

For the past two weeks, about the quickest way to see your friends and neighbors has been to visit the new Gene's Heartland Foods store on Highway 156.

The aisles are spacious; the employees friendly. Even the parking spaces seem unusually wide when compared to the store's former cramped quarters near downtown.

Without doubt, the store is an asset to Ellsworth and the area. Clasen, Inc., owner of Gene's, deserves a big thank you for making such a significant investment in the community.

Another business also deserves recognition for its involvement with the Gene's project.

Rolling Hill Electric Co-op worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development to tap into money that helped finance the new store.

As a result, Gene's stands to save about \$100,000 in interest, said Dale Weinhold, the co-op's director of member services.

The loan, for \$450,000, carries a zero interest rate. Because the money comes from a program open only to rural electric and telephone cooperatives, it must pass through Rolling Hills, which tacks on a 1 percent interest rate as a handling fee, on its way to Gene's.

That's a good deal no matter how you look at it.

And it's not the first time Rolling Hills has been involved in the expansion of a local business. Over the years, through loan and grant programs, the cooperative has provided financial assistance to Kansas Originals, Maico, Moly Manufacturing and the Snack Shack.

For our readers who don't remember, Rolling Hills is the product of a merger between three electric cooperatives, including the former Smoky Hills at Ellsworth. Other offices are at Mankato and Belleville.

Weinhold said some of the projects supported by Rolling Hills are outside its service territory. For instance, the utility does not provide power to Gene's. But some of its customers in Wilson and elsewhere might work there.

Those paychecks help pay the electric bills.

"These business development funds help assist important local efforts to bring added economic growth and employment opportunities to Ellsworth and surrounding counties," said Chuck Banks, USDA Rural Development state director, who attended Gene's May 10 grand opening.

In short, what helps the region benefits Rolling Hills. Now that's economic development.